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ABSTRACT

A study conducted in the Orange County Public Schools in central Florida investigated the reading interests of sixth-grade students. The study also gathered information from teachers regarding the nature and source of reading materials used for independent reading in their classrooms and on the implementation of sustained silent reading practices. Thirty-seven reading teachers completed a two-page survey, and 279 students completed a one-page survey. Results showed that students were most interested in mysteries, adventure, and "scary" stories. Favorite authors were Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Stephen King. Teachers reported that independent reading is a significant part of the sixth-grade reading program. The study revealed, however, that approximately 48% of the teachers provided half or more of the materials used during independent reading periods from personal funds. Recommendations include several suggestions for strengthening an independent reading program. (Copies of the student survey and the teacher survey are attached.) (SR)

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Independent Reading in the Sixth Grade:

Free Choice and Access to Material

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RUNNING HEAD: INDEPENDENT READING IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This descriptive study was conducted in the Orange County Public Schools, a K-12 district located in Central Florida, which serves almost 100,000 students living in the Orlando and surrounding areas. Student reading interests at the sixth-grade level were surveyed in ten of the eighteen middle schools. Sixth-grade reading teachers in all middle schools were surveyed regarding the nature and source of reading materials used for independent reading in their classrooms.

Among other findings, it was found that sixth-grade students are most interested in mysteries, adventure and scary stories respectively. Favorite authors were found to be Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary and Stephen King. Teachers reported that independent reading is a significant part of the sixth-grade reading program. The study revealed, however, that approximately 48 percent of the teachers provided half or more of the materials used during independent reading periods from personal funds.

Recommendations included several suggestions for strengthening an independent reading program.

Independent Reading in the Sixth-Grade:

Free Choice and Access to Material

Research and experience have demonstrated repeatedly that independent reading is a major source of a student's growth in vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985). Including time and access to trade books for independent reading in the classroom increases reading achievement and motivates student interest in reading for information as well as for pleasure. Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985) includes a number of well-defined recommendations for reading improvement. One of these recommendations is the following:

> Children should spend more time in independent reading. Independent reading, whether in school or out of school, is associated with gains in reading achievement. By the time they are in the third or fourth grade, children should read independently a minimum of two hours per week. Children's reading should include classic and modern works of fiction and nonfiction that represent the core of our cultural heritage.

Fader and McNeil (1968) used the term "Hooked on Books," to describe their program of independent reading using children's choices. This term was soon popularized and programs of sustained silent reading (SSR) were adopted in many elementary and middle schools.

The SSR program at Allegheny Middle School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was showcased in a videotape titled, "Drop Everything and Read." In the tape, narrator Meredith Baxter Birney (1987) states, " The

goal is to get these students "hooked on books" so that when they are out of school and on their own, they will take some time everyday to drop everything and read." Lynch-Brown (1990)describes SSR as a period of time, usually twenty to thirty minutes daily, when all school personnel as well as students participate in free-choice reading. Martinez, Vernon, Allen and Teale (1991) state "...research has shown that it is independent reading which leads to increased reading proficiency."

The case for including independent reading time in the school is well established and, according to the information presented in Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985), "Analysis of schools that have been successful in promoting independent reading suggest that one of the keys is ready access to books." The report continued, "...fully 15 percent of the nation's schools do not have libraries. In most of the remaining schools, the collections are small, averaging just over 13 volumes per student."

The Orange County Public School District has a library media center in each of the eighteen schools. Two new middle schools will open in August, 1991; each will have a library media center. The collections in these schools reflect the national average. This study is the first in the Orange County Public School District to gather data on the reading interests of sixth-grade students and the materials used for independent reading programs in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study.

This study sought to answer these questions:

(1) What categories of books are of most interest to sixth-grade middle school students when they have free choice?

(2) How many middle schools are implementing schoolwide sustained silent reading in their classrooms weekly? For what length of time?

(3) How many sixth-grade reading teachers are implementing sustained reading in their classrooms weekly? For what length of time?

(4) If sustained silent reading is being implemented schoolwide or within a classroom, how many recreational reading books are in the classroom?

(5) What percentage of these books have been purchased from personal funds; from school funds?

Methods and Procedures.

This descriptive study was conducted in the Orange County Public Schools, a K-12 district located in central Florida, which serves approximately 100,000 students living in the Orlando and surrounding areas. Surveys were conducted at the sixth-grade level in the middle schools. Ten of the eighteen middle schools were selected for the teacher survey.

Student data were collected from (20) sixth-grade classrooms, selected randomly from the reading classes in each of the ten schools. Teacher surveys were sent to each sixth-grade reading teacher in the eighteen middle schools. Thirty-seven of the sixty reading teachers (62%) responded to the teacher survey. The student survey (N = 279) was

designed to determine reading interests of sixth-grade students; while the teacher survey (N = 37) was designed to gather information on the implementation of sustained silent reading (SSR) practices for independent reading.

Researchers Coy-Shaffer and Pettit developed a one-page student reading survey and a two-page teacher survey. These surveys were piloted in a sixth-grade classroom and minor changes were made in the original survey as the result of this testing. Surveys are shown in Examples 1 and 2. Ten of the eighteen middle schools were selected randomly. In each of the ten schools, two sixth-grade reading classes were selected randomly from all of the district sixth-grade reading classes. All surveying was done in February, 1991.

Findings and Conclusions:

Data were analyzed using the SAS system (Statistical Analysis System), a commonly used statistical processing program, release 6.0. Descriptive statistical procedures were used to produce frequency distributions, means, and cross-tabulations. In addition, a content analysis of comments was conducted.

The student sample was 279: 160 girls; 119 boys. Thirty-seven of sixty reading teachers (62%) returned teacher surveys.

Student Survey.

Fourteen categories of genre were surveyed: Sports, romance, classics, science fiction, mysteries, adventure, nature/science, humor,

geography/history, fantasy/folklore, famous people, scary, animal stories and historical fiction.

To describe children's choices, the categories chosen were ranked from most often chosen to least often chosen (see Table I). The top ten categories were (1) mysteries; (2) adventure; (3) scary; (4) humor; (5) romance; and (6) sports. The fact that romance was chosen more often than sports may be the result of the unequal number between boys (119) and girls (160) in the study. Seventy-six (76) students selected romance. Of that number, sixty-eight (68) were girls. Of the sixty-six(66) students who selected sports, fifty-six (56) were boys.

The survey included a space titled "other" so that students could write in categories not provided in the general listing.

Table 1

Ranking of Children's Choices

Category	Percent of Children Choosing Genre
Mysteries	56%
Adventure	43%
Scary	43%
Humor	32%
Romance	27%
Sports	24%
Other (comics, magazines, Nintendo game books, poetry)	13%
Fantasy/Folklore	13%
Science Fiction	11%
Animal Stories	9%
Classics	8%
Famous People	6%

Category	Percent of Children Choosing Genre
Nature/Science	4%
Geography/History	4%
Historical Fiction	2%

Write-in responses included the following: comics, 9; magazines on topics such as skateboarding, martial arts and motorcycles, 5; Nintendo Game Books, 4; and poetry, 2.

Also, students were asked to name their favorite authors and titles of books that they have read and have liked. Girls chose authors such as Judy Blume, Ann Martin, Beverly Cleary, Stephen King, Francine Pascal, and Carolyn Keene. Titles most often of interest to girls were books in series. The three most popular series were Babysitter's Club, Sweet Valley Twins/Sweet Valley High, and Nancy Drew.

Boys' selections of authors were more varied; only two authors had a high frequency of responses: Judy Blume and Stephen King. Titles again were varied; Superfudge and the Hardy Boys series were most often listed.

Boys' and girls' combined responses yielded the following data regarding favorite authors: Blume was selected by 17% of the students; Cleary by 14%; and King by 11%.

Teacher Survey.

Sixty surveys were mailed to sixth-grade teachers who are responsible for reading as their teaching assignment. Of the thirty-seven respondents, twenty-seven (27) were reading teachers; nine (9) were reading and content area teachers. One listed content area teacher only.

Data collected regarding schoolwide SSR breaks indicated that 94 percent of the middle school teachers surveyed reported that they participated in such a program on a regular basis. Sixty-six percent of these teachers spend 21 to 30 minutes weekly in SSR (see Table 2).

Table 2

Time Spent in Weekly SSR Programs at the Middle School	
Length of Break in Minutes	Percent of Teachers Participating
0 - 10	5.7
11 - 20	28.6
21 - 30	65.7

In addition to the schoolwide break, 73 percent of the teaches have SSR classroom breaks. The survey showed that 41 percent of the teachers spend 11 to 20 minutes for individual classroom breaks (see Table 3)

Table 3

Time Spent in Classroom SSR Programs at the Middle School	
Length of Break in Minutes	Percent of Teachers Participating
0 - 10	25.9
11 - 20	40.7
21 - 30	33.3

When queried as to the number of paperback books that were available in the classroom for sustained silent reading, approximately 38 percent of the teachers responded that there were 0 to 40 books in their classrooms, while 32 percent indicated 81 - 100 books in their classrooms (see Table 4).

Table 4

Number of Paperback Books in Classroom for SSR	
Number of Books	Percent of Teacher Responses
0 - 20	
21 -40	16.2
41 - 60	16.2
61 - 80	13.5
81 - 100	32.4

Forty-eight percent of the respondents purchased half or more of the books used for independent reading in their classrooms. Of that, 27 percent purchased all of their books through personal funds. In addition, 40 percent of the respondents reported that the paperback books used in the classroom are in excellent condition. To supplement the paperback collections in the classroom, all of the teachers surveyed reported that they supplement the SSR program with hardback books, magazines, newspapers and comic books. One teacher reported using student written stories.

Discussion.

Results of the survey on children's choices indicated that children of this age are interested in many categories of reading material. Of greater interest were mysteries, adventure and scary stories. Of lesser interest were historical fiction and geography, which could be a function of one or more of the following factors; 1) the developmental level of these students, 2) lack of children's literature written in these categories, 3) unavailability of this type of literature in the classroom and/or library media center, 4) inability of teachers to motivate students to read this genre.

Data showed that girls tended to choose books in series more often than did boys. Girls and boys listed Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary and Stephen King as favorite authors. Combined student responses were Blume, 17%; Cleary, 14%; and King, 11%.

Blume's popularity may be due to the fact that she usually writes about problems encountered by preadolescents and adolescents in today's society. Scales (1983) state that ..."today's youth are more concerned with pressures of their own world."

Cleary is a series fiction author who is able to create stories about children in realistic and humorous situations.

King writes adult-oriented horror stories. As this study has shown, students of this age are intrigued by mysteries, adventure and scary stories. King's books seem to blend all three. In addition, his work can be seen on television and in the movie theaters. Experience has shown that when books have been made into movies, children are likely to be influenced to read those books and books by that particular author. Educators and parents need to be aware that children in this age group are obviously reading and seeing King's works.

The variety of categories and the differing levels at which these authors write, indicate a wide range of reading abilities and maturity levels in sixth-grade students. One way that parents and educators can guide children's growth in reading is to share reading experiences with them. Scales (1983) suggests communicating through literature by making reading a means to "...develop positive communication between parents and their

children," and "...to encourage a better relationship between the school and community by involving the parents in the school program."

Independent reading programs are in place in 89 percent of the middle schools in the Orange County Public Schools. This figure is above the state average of 84% reported by Irvin, (1988). The teachers surveyed not only participate in the schoolwide program, but 73 percent also initiate classroom SSR programs. But the responsibility for supplying reading materials for both programs is almost entirely placed upon the individual classroom teacher.

Although many teachers have collected books for their libraries through book clubs and by purchasing books with their own funds at garage sales and book sales, these efforts, although laudatory, build in inequity in the reading materials that are available to students. For example, one classroom might have 100 paperback books which cover a variety of topics, while a classroom in another school might have one or two outdated books. Ley (1979) states, "Since availability is a major factor influencing choice of reading material, you should attempt to surround students with high-interest materials in the classroom and to make their use of the school library desirable and convenient."

It is the opinion of these researchers that classroom teachers should not have the responsibility of providing independent reading material for classroom use from personal funds. One can easily understand that, in this period of budgetary constraint, some teachers are not able to provide an entire classroom with materials for independent reading. Also, a lack of

monies reduces or eliminates using school-based/district funds for this purpose. In either scenario, students are the losers.

Recommendations.

Results of this survey indicate that children have specific interests and are willing and eager to pursue those interests if given appropriate reading materials. Children's choices are evident: children will read what interests them. However, having access to reading material is quite another matter.

Based on the results of this study, recommendations are as follows:

1. Teachers should include at least 10-15 minutes of independent reading time in their classrooms daily.

2. A period of schoolwide SSR should be a part of every middle school curriculum for at least 15-20 minutes weekly.

3. Trade books, magazines and newspapers should be made available in a variety of categories in order to accommodate the wide range of interests and reading abilities of sixth-grade students.

4. Parents and educators should guide children's growth in reading by sharing experiences such as those listed below:

   a. reading aloud to children

   b. acting as guest readers in classrooms

   c. listening to children read

   d. discussing with children what they have read

5. Alternative solutions should be found for supplying classrooms with independent reading materials. Some of these alternatives are:

a. providing monies from the school budget for trade books to be used in the classroom.

b. writing proposals to obtain a district, public or private grant.

c. making application to Reading is Fundamental (RIF), Washington, D.C. RIF partners are eligible for discounts on trade books ordered directly from the publisher.

d. seeking business/community partners. For example, sixth-grade students from the Sunday school classes at the First United Methodist churches in Winter Park and Orlando donated books from their personal libraries for four sixth-grade classrooms. This activity proved to be a wonderful way to share books that sixth-grade students want to read. Comments from the teachers, who previously had few paperback books in the classroom were, "I can't express how excited the students have been over reading these books. They love them!" "The students can't wait for our independent reading time!" "Discipline problems have almost disappeared since we have started independent reading time."

e. organizing book fairs to provide monies to purchase reading materials for the classroom.

6. Teams of teachers in cooperation with the library media specialist should encourage students to donate books from home. Sharing is a quality that is valued by our culture. Providing opportunities for students to share with other students is one way that teachers are able to develop this quality in their students. For example, one teacher in the Orange County School District collects books and uses them for an independent reading activity in

the cafeteria during lunch. Students select a book to read during lunch. Points are earned for reading time and these points may be used later at an open auction.

7. Teams of teachers should promote traveling paperback libraries not only within a middle school team, but also across teams. To provide more reading materials for their students, teams of teachers may share paperback libraries every six to nine weeks. This process may be coordinated by the chairperson of the reading or language arts departments or by the library media specialist.

8. Teachers and the library media specialist should cooperate to promote literacy and the enjoyment of reading throughout the school curriculum.

Children learn to read by reading! Having a room environment that is rich in a variety of print materials and that allows children free choice and exploration of those materials is the sign of an enlightened educator. Providing time and access to these materials is the sign of an enlightened administrator.

Example 1

SIXTH-GRADE STUDENT READING SURVEY

_____Boy _____Girl _____School

1. Check the three (3) kinds of books that you like most.

_____ Sports
_____ Romance
_____ Classics
_____ Science Fiction
_____ Mysteries
_____ Adventure
_____ Nature/Science
_____ Humor
_____ Geography/History
_____ Fantasy/Folklore
_____ Famous People
_____ Scary
_____ Animal Stories
_____ Historical Fiction
_____ Other. What? _____

2. If you want to, name titles of books you have read and have really liked.

_____ _____
_____ _____
_____ _____

3. If you want to, name your favorite authors.

_____
_____
_____

Sixth-grade Student Reading Survey
January 1991

Thank you! Orange County Public Schools

Example 2

SIXTH-GRADE CLASSROOM SURVEY OF PAPERBACK BOOKS
RECREATIONAL/SUSTAINED SILENT READING

_____Male _____Female _____School

Check the category that best describes your assignment.

_____ reading teacher only
_____ content area teacher only
_____ reading and content area teacher

1. Check the number of paperback books (not magazines or hardbacks) in your classroom that could be used for recreational/sustained silent reading.

_____ 0 - 20
_____ 21 - 40
_____ 40 - 60
_____ 61 - 80
_____ 81 - 100

2. What percentage of these books have you purchased with your personal funds and how many from school funds? (approximate percentage)

_____percent personal funds _____percent school funds

3. What percentage of the books are in excellent, good or poor condition (i.e., cover, pages). Indicate the approximate percentage by each category below.

_____percent excellent _____percent good _____percent poor

4. Check other materials that you use with your students for recreational reading.

_____ hardback books
_____ magazines
_____ newspapers
_____ comic books
_____ other. What?_____

Example 2 (cont'd)

5. Do you have a recreational/sustained silent reading break at your school?

_____Yes _____No

6. If yes, how long is the reading break?

_____ 0 - 10 minutes
_____ 11 - 20 minutes
_____ 21 - 30 minutes

7. Do you have a reading break in your classroom in addition to the schoolwide reading break?

_____ Yes
_____ No

8. If yes, how long is the reading break?

_____ 0 - 10 minutes
_____ 11 - 20 minutes
_____ 21 - 30 minutes

9. Have you used books for bibliotherapy? If yes, which titles?

_____
_____

10. Check these programs that you have promoted and/or encouraged.

_____ Sunshine State Young Readers Award Program
_____ Newbery Award Books
_____ Other, Which?_____
_____ None

OPTIONAL: Name authors/titles of books that are very popular with your students.

_____
_____
_____
_____

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